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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 005076

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SUBJECT: FORMER THAI RAK THAI CARETAKER SEES GOOD PROSPECTS
FOR PPP

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Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Former Thai Rak Thai caretaker Chaturon Chaiseng told the Ambassador that the pro-Thaksin People's Power Party (PPP) was on track to win a plurality in coming elections -- 200 or more of the 480 seats in the House of Representatives. Chaturon said the military, which in recent months has been preoccupied with its annual reshuffle, was well aware of PPP's strength and gathering momentum; he expressed concern that the military might take action before or during the next election to subvert PPP. He appeared to view the appointment of Army Commander Anupong Paojinda as a relatively positive development, however. Chaturon expected that the next legislature would seek to amend the 2007 constitution and would consider whether to grant amnesty to Thai Rak Thai executives who have been stripped of their political rights by the Constitutional Tribunal's May ruling. End Summary.

STAYING IN THE BACKGROUND

¶2. (C) The Ambassador met on September 21 with Chaturon Chaiseng, who served as acting Party Leader of Thai Rak Thai (TRT) from the time of the 2006 coup d'etat until the party's dissolution by the Constitutional Tribunal in May 2007. Chaturon said he was now affiliated with the People's Power Party (PPP), the principal pro-Thaksin TRT successor party, but he had to take a low-profile and informal role because he was among the former TRT executive board members banned from holding office for a five-year period.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador asked whether Chaturon, who had joined the Thai communist movement in the 1970s, found it difficult to deal with PPP Party Leader Samak Sundaravej, who (at that same time) had encouraged the security forces to use extreme prejudice in their anti-communist efforts. Chaturon acknowledged he was not on particularly good terms with Samak; the two had only met once in recent months. Nevertheless, Chaturon said he believed even a blunt,

opinionated, confrontational figure like Samak could serve the country better than some of the politicians who claimed to be democratic but supported the 2006 coup. Chaturon recounted that he found it frustrating, however, that Samak seemed less interested than Chaturon in building PPP as a party focused on policies rather than personalities and superficial appeal.

¶4. (C) Chaturon appeared generally dismayed with other leading figures in PPP, such as Yongyuth Tiypairat, Chalerm Yubamroong, and (in the background) Newin Chidchob. Chaturon also described deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra as active in formulating the party's strategy. Thaksin believed that support for PPP reflected Thaksin's personal appeal to the masses, and he felt the results of the August constitutional referendum -- in which 42 percent of the population rejected the new charter -- indicated he had significant political momentum.

¶5. (C) The referendum results had convinced many politicians from TRT areas that it would difficult for them to win election if they had to run against PPP candidates, Chaturon said. Thus, more former TRT legislators who had previously lined up with PPP's potential rivals were beginning to switch their allegiance to PPP.

PROJECTIONS

¶6. (C) Chaturon offered the following projections for PPP's performance in the coming elections:

NORTHEAST: PPP should win a minimum of 120 of the 135 constituency-based House seats in the Northeast. In this region, PPP's performance would be weakest in Nakhon Ratchasima, a province with 16 representatives, where former

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TRT Deputy Leader Suwat Liptapanlop retained influence and was backing a rival party. Chaturon observed that loyalists of TRT defector Phinij Jarusombat, based in Nong Khai, were deserting Phinij and joining PPP.

NORTH: PPP should win at least 50 of the 77 constituency-based House seats in the North. Chaturon conceded that the Democrat Party (DP) was making inroads in Tak and Kampheng Phet provinces, where the DP had had influence in previous years. He also said PPP might not do well in Mae Hong Son province, primarily because of the heavy military presence there (and the military's adversarial view of PPP).

CENTRAL AND EAST: Chaturon said PPP could win 20-30 of the 96 constituency-based seats in central and eastern Thailand; this was an offhand estimate, as he was not aware of a detailed study of this area.

BANGKOK: Chaturon conservatively said PPP might win between zero and five of the 36 constituency-based seats in the capital. PPP might win in outlying areas such as Bangkok, but he said other estimates we have heard (that PPP might win up to half the seats from Bangkok) struck him as too optimistic. However, he added that the government had abandoned its most potent strategy to turn middle and upper class opinion against PPP when it stopped pursuing lese majeste charges against Thaksin.

SOUTH: PPP would not win any seats in the South (56 seats), Chaturon conceded; he expected the region to remain the DP's stronghold.

¶7. (C) The above estimates did not take into account the 80 legislative seats apportioned to candidates on regional party lists. Chaturon acknowledged an unexpectedly strong PPP performance in Bangkok, or in the central or eastern regions, could provide PPP with the 241 seats needed to hold an

absolute majority and form a single-party government. However, he believed it more likely that that PPP would fall short of a majority. With all other parties currently inclined against joining PPP in a coalition, he considered it most likely that PPP would resign itself to being in opposition -- albeit as the most powerful opposition party in Thai history.

MILITARY

18. (C) Chaturon worried that the prospect of a strong PPP plurality would energize the military. He was unsure what sorts of actions the military might undertake in response, before or during the election. Some might prove effective, such as threatening or monitoring PPP's canvassers while facilitating the operations of PPP's rivals'. He worried the Election Commission might act in a partisan manner, as most provincial EC officials simultaneously held government positions. Chaturon also raised the prospect that PPP Party Leader Samak could be jailed. (Samak currently is the subject of a corruption investigation, but he seemed unconcerned when the Ambassador raised the matter in an August 30 meeting.)

19. (C) Others steps the military might take could be counterproductive; citing public reports that the authorities might impose martial law in some northeastern provinces where it was not in effect, Chaturon said this move would further anger voters who had already signaled their displeasure with the government by rejecting the constitution. He added that efforts to deploy soldiers in villages in order to "educate" the population on political matters had proven ineffective; often, the villagers wound up "educating" the soldiers. (Nevertheless, Chaturon said the military was no longer divided between pro- and anti-Thaksin elements; the Council for National Security had effectively unified the military and aligned it against PPP.)

110. (C) Chaturon saw the appointment of Anupong Paojinda as

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the new Army Commander as a relatively positive sign. Despite Anupong having participated in the coup, Chaturon characterized him as "not very aggressive" and generally disposed against military involvement in politics -- "at least publicly." Chaturon said there was some chance that, under Anupong, the military might exert less influence in the political realm, but he noted Anupong was selected by Prime Minister Surayud and more senior figures (most likely an allusion to Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda). Chaturon implied that, regardless of Anupong's inclinations, he would have to mobilize the military to defend his patrons' interests, if necessary. Noting that the military had up until this point been preoccupied with the annual reshuffle of senior officers, Chaturon predicted that the senior officers would focus increasingly on the predicament generated by PPP's popularity.

AMNESTY

11. (C) The coup leaders had blundered in issuing a decree which enabled the Constitutional Tribunal to strip the entire TRT executive board of its political rights, Chaturon claimed. He said that most military figures appeared politically inept and would not be able to tap major financiers to establish political parties capable of competing effectively with PPP. The Army's interests would have been better served if former TRT politicians (e.g., Somsak Thepsutin, Suwat Liptapanlop) were left free to participate in the political process. This would have given them the incentive to work for and fund parties able to draw support away from PPP.

12. (C) Chaturon admitted he had a high personal stake in the

matter. He related that Thaksin had told many associates that he (Thaksin) would have backed Chaturon to lead TRT's principal successor party, if Chaturon had not been stripped of his political rights.

¶13. (C) While hoping the next parliament would provide some form of amnesty for former TRT executives, Chaturon believed PPP Party Leader Samak had erred in publicly advocating this step in August. Many senior politicians not currently aligned with PPP also favored an amnesty, and it would have been easier to make progress toward this goal if Samak had worked with other former TRT figures outside of PPP to build a consensus rather than taking ownership of the issue at such an early stage.

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK

¶14. (C) After the election, Thailand would return to a political system characterized by weak coalition governments, Chaturon lamented. He said PPP and other parties would likely work together to amend the 2007 constitution, which provided for a political system designed principally to prevent Thaksin from returning to power.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) Chaturon's assessment of the political map is consistent with that of other contacts. There are widespread assumptions that the military will not allow PPP to form the next government and will take active steps to keep the party's representation in the parliament as low as possible, but it is unclear whether those assumptions can be substantiated. We will continue to monitor whether the military or other authorities are mobilizing to prevent PPP from getting anything close to a majority in the election.
BOYCE